

LOUIS AGASSIZ.

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.
LOUIS AGASSIZ, HIS LIFE AND WORK. By Charles Frederick Holder, LL. D., 12mo, pp. 327. Illustrated. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

The second volume of the new series entitled "Leaders of Science" is devoted to a genial and sympathetic sketch of Louis Agassiz by Professor Holder. It would, indeed, be hard to choose a life which leads itself more readily to the uses of didactic biography than that of Agassiz; and it needs to be said that the present biographer has yielded rather too much to a temptation inherent in the subject; the temptation, namely, to make Agassiz pose rather as a Sunday-school hero than as a sober man of science. But it is, perhaps, neither possible nor desirable that this man should be written about precisely like other men. For his was an exceptional nature, gifted with exceptional powers, and in every way equipped and fitted for the great work of scientific education which came to him as naturally as breathing, and which he urged forward as long as his strength lasted with an almost Titanic energy and vigor.

The life of Agassiz, moreover, must always possess a special charm of its own for quiet minds and for all who reverence pure and unselfish devotion to good human interests. Possibly the man who devotes all his brain and physical power to the conquest of disease fills the higher place; yet it is not easy to determine even that question, for science is forever making far-reaching and even vital discoveries, and the student never knows when he is on the verge of some momentous revelation. Louis Agassiz was one of those men who are plainly and unmistakably born to be scientists and to nothing else. His childhood and boyhood, spent in his native Switzerland, were merely stepping-stones in his development. He could work in many directions, but all his work took the bent of scientific research. He was a keen naturalist before he reached his teens, and he had the inestimable advantage of being thrown among men of science and of letters who were quick to recognize his genius, and prompt to assist him in its development.

But what must surprise all who are not familiar with his career is his positively insatiable appetite for work. No doubt he studied hard for several years at several Continental universities and schools, and no doubt his magnificent physique enabled him to do three or four times the amount that ordinary young men could attain. Before his education was fairly finished he was plunged over head and ears in laborious engagements, such as his monumental work on fishes, and year after year the scope of his occupation extended without in the least affecting his elasticity. Professor Holder has appended a bibliography of Agassiz's work to this volume, and even that, it seems, does not really include all his writings, many of which are scattered through scientific publications, and have never yet been collected.

Of course for Americans what he wrought in this country is of deepest interest, and what that was Professor Holder might possibly have made somewhat more clear to his readers. What he dwells on, a little too strongly in some instances, is the immense enthusiasm evoked by Agassiz, and the pietistic attitude of his scientific positions. Inasmuch as even in this country Agassiz's religious addenda to science have been quietly laid on the shelf, it seems hardly worth while to make a parade of this side of his character. No one, of course, has ever questioned his sincerity in premises, but his ratiocinative faculty has been laid open to doubt. His tiffs with Mr. Darwin were interesting at the moment, but they left no residuum, and Darwin's conclusions on all, or nearly all, the disputed points are the ones which the scientific world alone recognizes.

Agassiz's enthusiasm and reverence may very well have helped him in his efforts to indoctrinate American youth with a love of science and keen desire to investigate nature at first hand. He taught all his pupils to teach themselves. That was, perhaps, the most priceless lesson which he conveyed. He made them master what they knew; take it from the lips of Nature herself: seek it on the shore, in the sea, among the woods and fields. That is how he created a genuine school of real students, who set out with truly admirable methods, and whose work for science is even now, but in its earlier stages. No man perhaps can have done better, or as well, what Agassiz did in this direction. He knew how to make men learn.

That was the central secret of his genius. Then, too, his fine enthusiasm fired many dry hearts and made them come to the help of struggling science. In that day the prosperous class looked askance upon science. They did not sympathize with its purposes. They thought what they called "business" was the only career in which men were justified in spending their lives.

Agassiz taught them differently. He made them see a new light, and what was more to the purpose, he made them help pay for spreading that light all over the land. The work he did in this way cannot be fairly estimated. It is not too much to say that all the scientific teaching and work of value that has been produced here in the last generation owes its existence to Louis Agassiz. He wore himself out completely in it, but he did not care for that. He was fulfilling his destiny, and he was at the same time making immortality. It is as an unparalleled worker and organizer that he must always be remembered, and as one of the most thorough and honest workers who ever lived. American science owes him a debt which can never be paid, and not only American science, but American believers in the higher life everywhere. In many important respects he was a great man, and his usefulness is of a character to go on increasing with time. Professor Holder has written an interesting but necessarily abbreviated account of him, and some readers may think that it was hardly wise to reproduce so many pages of the kind of semi-official funeral orations which were made after his death. Certainly nothing of the kind could have been necessary to show the standing of Agassiz in the opinion of his contemporaries.

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